

UNDERSTANDING UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATES' ATTRIBUTION STYLES IN ACADEMIC PROCRASTINATION

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Abstract- The study investigated university undergraduates' attribution styles in academic procrastination. It further analyzed specific responses of the undergraduates' academic procrastination based on attribution styles. This study adopted a survey design of correlational type. The sample size for the study comprised 1,800 university undergraduates selected through the use of multistage sampling process. A researcher designed questionnaire titled: Paradigm Model of Academic Procrastination Questionnaire (PMAPQ). Items in PMAPQ were generated based on the outcome of a grounded theory of procrastination as reported by Schraw, Wadkins, and Olafson (2007). This instrument was pilot-tested on 40 university undergraduates, using internal consistency approach; a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.78 was obtained. Data was analyzed using mean, percentage and charts. Results revealed that 48.4% of the students attributed procrastination in academics to task related characteristics, 27.3% attributed procrastination to self-related characteristics while 24.3% attributed their procrastination in academic task to teachers related characteristics. Results further showed that 84.03% of the students who attributed procrastination to task-characteristics procrastinated when the task is not their priority; 84.80% of those with self-related characteristics attribution procrastinated when the task is boring while 79.21% of those with teacher-related characteristics attribution procrastinated when course instructors give clear instruction on the task to be done. The study concludes that university undergraduates in the South west Nigeria attribute their procrastinatory behaviors more to task, and self-characteristics than teacher-related characteristics. The study therefore recommends that the undergraduates need to be taught how to be more proactive in their learning/study habits with adequate skills in self-regulated learning to tackle the incidence of academic procrastination.

Keywords- Attribution styles, Task, Academic, Procrastination,, Undergraduates

1. INTRODUCTION

Discourse on reasons why learners usually shift academic tasks ought to have been done at present till later time has received much attention of the scholars in the recent times. This tendency or habit of shifting academic task that is supposed to have been done presently till later time is described as academic procrastination. Many scholars have examined what actually qualifies behaviors to be termed as procrastination and as a result come out with different definitions of the construct. While Kachgal, Hansen and Nutter (2001) defined it as either a trait or behavioral disposition in which performance of task or decision making is postponed or delayed, the term is being defined as the act of purposive voluntary delay in beginning or finishing a task expected to have been completed at present time until some other times (Freeman, Cox-Fuenzalida & Stoltenberg, 2011; Gupta, Hershey & Gaur, 2012; Rozental & Carlbring, 2013).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Prevalence of procrastination in academic task has been reported in studies such as Schubert, Lilly, and Stewart (2000); Onwueguzie (2004); Balkis and Duru (2007); Abu-Ghazal (2012) and Steel and Ferrari (2013). Though, there exist a variability in the percentage of prevalence

level reported by each study, however, it is clearly evident from their research outcomes that students most especially in colleges and universities engaged in the habit of procrastination. On what may be the likely implication of this habit among the learners, various scholars have investigated the effect of this behavior on both the academic achievement and the psychological well-being of the individual learners.

Evidence has shown that attention of discourse on procrastination has been focused more on the debilitating effects (maladaptive) of the habit than the adaptive potentials. More recently, research evidences have shown that procrastination has certain positive utility. Among the debilitating effects of academic procrastination are poor academic performance (Fritzsche, Young, & Hickson, 2003; Akinsola, Tella, & Tella, 2007; Savithri, 2014; Kim & Seo, 2015) and low self-esteem and delay in task completion (Ferrari & Emmons, 1995). These negative effects are described as maladaptive aspect of procrastination (Schraw, Wadkins & Olafson, 2007). The adaptive aspect of procrastination identified in the literature include aroused incentive to achieve optimum performance, and increased challenge for less motivating tasks (Wang, Sperling & Haspel, 2015); and increased ability to engaged in sustained work and increased flow (Brinthaupt & Shin, 2001; Tullier, 2000). If the act of procrastination in academic tasks is completely without certain positive utility, the negative consequences usually believed to be the outcome of the act is enough to exterminate the habit among learners. For learners who utilize the habit of procrastination for adaptive purposes, it might serve as efficient strategy for dealing with academic tasks. Therefore, procrastination can be adaptive or maladaptive subject to the manner at which the learners deploy its use in learning tasks.

Learners usually give reasons or explanations for the outcome of their performance (Ajayi & Owadara, 2014). This perceived reason or explanation for the outcome of a task or behavior is termed as attribution (Weiner, 1992). Attribution explains what the individual believes or perceives as the cause of the behavior exhibiting under given situation or circumstance. Therefore, the pattern of explanations which individual gives as the cause of event is termed as attribution style. Understanding of factors that motivate or propel an individual into a given action or behavior is very crucial as it provides a baseline data on how well individual can be helped in making a positive adjustment when necessary.

Attribution theory is premised on the assumption that learners attempt to understand and explain the causes of their behavior in such a manner as to maintain a positive self-image (Rakes, Dunn & Rakes, 2013). Individuals usually focus his/her explanation on either internal factors (ability, effort) or external factors such as luck or context. These factors (internal or external) are also viewed in terms of how controllable or uncontrollable they are to the individuals. The extent into which the individuals perceive a situation as either controllable or uncontrollable usually has implications on their level of motivation and their subsequent behavior (Weiner, 1986). According to Weiner (1994, 2000) the perceived causal determinants of outcomes can be categorized into three dimensions of locus, stability, and control. These attributional dimensions influence the degree at which the individuals cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally act or respond in future situations (Weiner, 1994).

In relation to academic procrastination, Schraw, Wadkins and Olafson (2007) examined the antecedents of procrastination as part of their study and concluded that learners attributed procrastination to three types of antecedents. These include the characteristics of self, teacher, and task. It was reported in their findings that the chief among the self-characteristics that cause

procrastination is individual personal interest. Tendency is high for learners to procrastinate or delay the completion of task they did not enjoy. Also, organizational skills of the learners are other self-related characteristics that can predispose learners to engage in procrastination. Learners with good organizational skills tend to rely on their ability to catch up at any time with task at hand.

Teacher characteristics can play an important role in learners' tendency to procrastinate. According to the findings of Schraw, Wadkins and Olafson (2007), teachers who usually provide the details in relation to a given task or course may indirectly promote procrastinatory act among the learners. It is believed that teacher-imposed structure offers students opportunity to plan more effectively and this may propel them into engaging in procrastinatory behaviour on the given task. Expectation of teacher is another teacher-related factor as teachers who expect less from learners or more flexible in handling them tend to promote procrastination. However, teachers who demand more work with better quality decrease learner's tendency to procrastinate.

Task that requires low prior knowledge increases learner's chances to procrastinate whereas; if an extensive prior knowledge is required for learning a given task, the tendency of learners to procrastinate decreases. In addition, difficult tasks decrease procrastination while learners tend to procrastinate more with less difficult ones. This task-difficulty antecedent of procrastination is described as task averseness by Steel (2007). According to Steel (2007), tendency is high for an individual to shy away from some stimuli with aversive nature. Therefore, a very difficult task may constitute some forms of aversive stimulus to learners and thereby approach with dislike. Though, other personal characteristics such as boredom proneness, and intrinsic motivation are important influential factors that can responsible for what makes individuals to dislike a task Steel (2007).

As shown from literature evidence on predisposing factors of procrastination in academic settings, learners' attribution in academic task can be either internal or external with implications on motivation for learning. In Nigeria, related studies on undergraduates' procrastination in academic seem to have focused more on its influence on academic achievement (Popoola, 2005; Akinsola, Tella, & Tella, 2007, Aremu, Williams, & Adesina, 2011) and its relationship with personality types (Bibire, 2016). There seems to be a dearth of empirical information on the antecedents that the university undergraduates in South west Nigeria attributed their procrastination. Since attribution dimensions influence the degree at which the individuals act or respond in future situations, there is a need to investigate the university undergraduates' attribution styles in procrastination. This understanding will provide crucial information and empirically based data through which effective intervention strategy can be put in place. This study therefore attempted to fill the vacuum in this direction by examining university undergraduates' attribution styles in academic procrastination.

2.1 Research Objective: To examine the university undergraduates' attribution styles in academic procrastination.

2.2 Research Question: What are the university undergraduates' attribution styles in academic procrastination?

3. METHOD

This study adopted a survey design of correlational type. The population of this study comprised university undergraduates in all the Government owned universities in the south-west geopolitical zone of the country whereas; the target population was undergraduates of second year or 200 level and above. The sample size for the study comprised 1,800 university undergraduates. Participants for the study were selected through the use of multistage sampling process. Three states were selected from the six states in the zone using simple random sampling technique. Two universities were then selected in each of the selected states using purposive sampling technique. Universities owned by the government (either federal or state) were selected since they are both in the category of public universities. In each of the selected university, three faculties were selected using simple random sampling technique and 100 undergraduates were selected from each faculty using accidental sampling technique making 300 undergraduates in each of the selected universities that participated in the study. However, out of the 1,800 administered questionnaires, 1,784 representing 99.1% of the proposed sample size were found usable. The instrument used for the collection of data in this study is a researcher designed questionnaire titled: Paradigm Model of Academic Procrastination Questionnaire (PMA PQ). Items in PMA PQ were generated based on the outcome of a grounded theory of procrastination as reported by Schraw, Wadkins, and Olafson (2007). The PMA PQ took on a 4 point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The reliability of Paradigm Model of Academic Procrastination Questionnaire (PMA PQ) was determined by administering copy of the instrument to 40 undergraduates of University and internal consistency approach used yielded a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.78.

4. RESULTS

Research Question: What are the university undergraduates' attribution styles in academic procrastination?

Table 1: University Undergraduates' Attribution Styles in Academic Procrastination.

Attribution Styles	Mean	SD	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
Task Characteristics	10.94	2.01	864	48.4
Self - Characteristics	10.26	2.24	487	27.3
Teachers Characteristics	9.95	2.47	433	24.3
Total			1784	100.0

Table 1 shows the attribution styles of university undergraduates in South west Nigeria. It is shown that out of 1784(100.0%) of the students that participated in this study, 864(48.4%) attributed procrastination in academics to task related characteristics. Also, 487(27.3%) attributed procrastination to self- related characteristics while 433(24.3%) attributed their procrastination in academic task to teachers related characteristics. As shown in the result above, it is clearly shown that more of university undergraduates attributed their procrastination in academics tasks to task, and self-related characteristics than teachers' related characteristics.

Further analysis was performed based on attribution styles of the individual university undergraduates. However, the response patterns to each constituting item was modified such that Strongly agree and agree responses were collapsed as agree while Disagree and strongly disagree responses were treated as disagree. The results are presented in Figures 1 to 3.

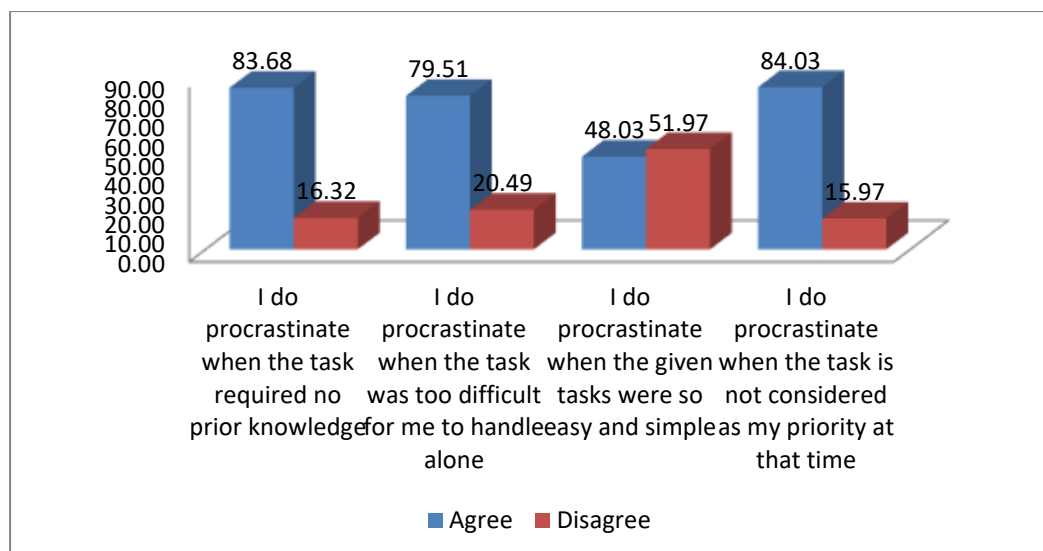


Figure 1: Percentage Response of Undergraduates Attributed Procrastination to Task Characteristics

Figure 1 shows the percentage response of the undergraduates that attributed their academic procrastination to task-related characteristics. As shown in figure 1, 83.7% indicated that they procrastinated when the task requires no prior knowledge, 79.5% do procrastinate when the task was too difficult to handle alone, 48.0% procrastinated when the given tasks were so easy and simple to handle while 84.0% procrastinated when the task is not considered as their priority at the time. It is shown from this result that prior knowledge on a given task, importance placed on task in terms of time of completion or submission, and difficulty of task are very crucial determinants of task-related characteristics that predispose students to procrastination.

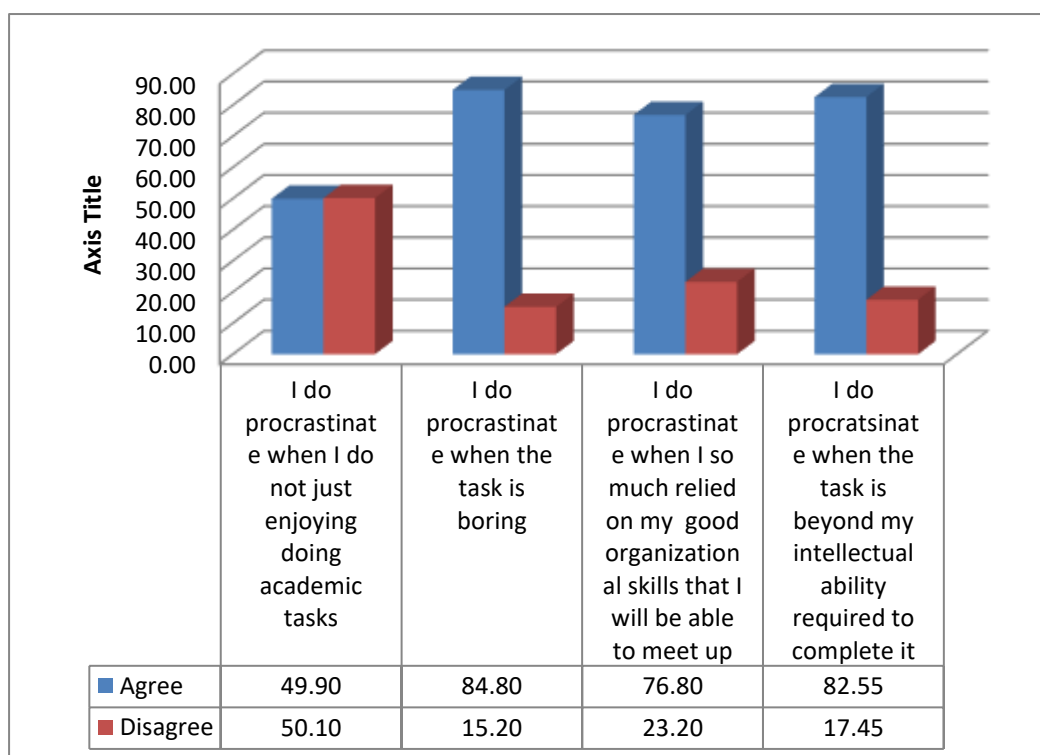


Figure 2: Percentage Response of Undergraduates Attributed Procrastination to Self-Related Characteristics

Figure 2 shows the percentage response of the undergraduates that attributed their academic procrastination to self-related characteristics. As shown in figure 2, 49.9% indicated that they procrastinated when doing the given academic task is not enjoyable, 84.8% do procrastinate when the task is boring to them, 76.8% procrastinated when they are confident in their organizational skills while 82.6% procrastinated when they lack the required intellectual capability to complete the task. It is shown from this result that how interesting a task is, to complete, individual intellectual capability for a given task, and possession of good organizational skills play a significant role in determining of self-related characteristics when considering procrastination.

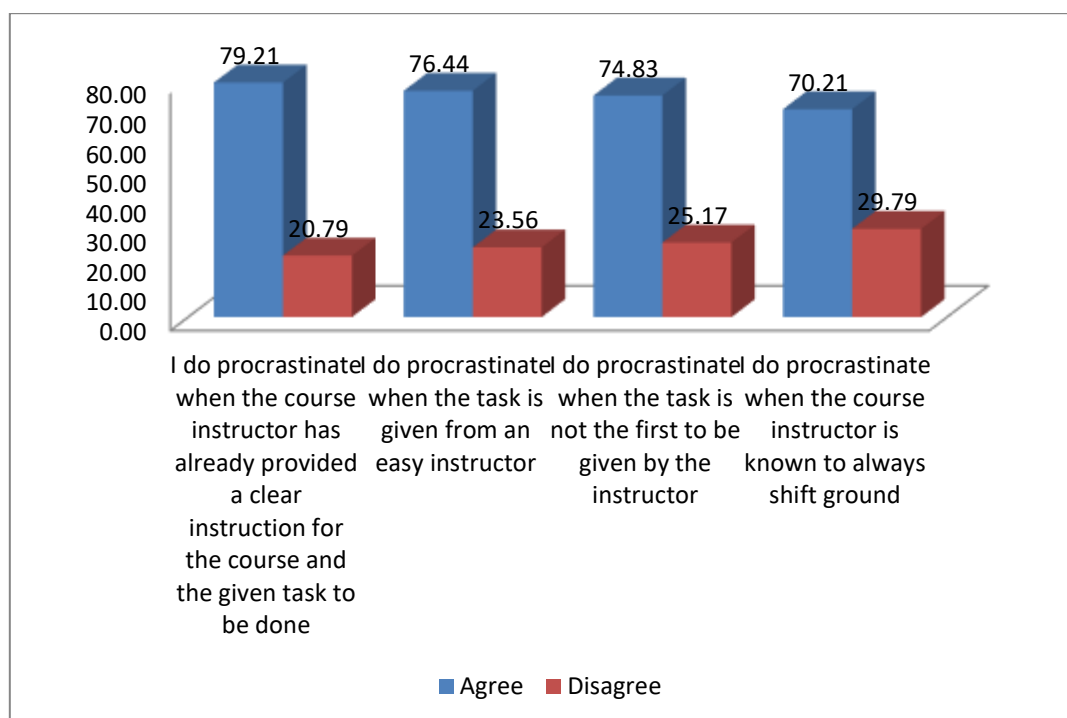


Figure 3: Percentage Response of Undergraduates Attributed Procrastination to Teacher-Related Characteristics

Figure 3 shows the percentage response of the undergraduates that attributed their academic procrastination to teacher-related characteristics. As shown in figure 3, 79.2% indicated that they procrastinated when the course instructor has already provided a clear instruction for the course and the given task to be done, 76.4% do procrastinate when the task is given by an easy instructor, 74.8% procrastinated when the tasks is not the first to be given by the instructor while 70.2% procrastinated when the course instructor is known to always shift ground. It is shown from this result that provision of details instruction by instructor, how easy or otherwise the instructor is, having understanding about the instructor's modus operandi, and flexibility of instructor are very important determinants in teacher-related characteristics that predispose students to procrastination.

5. DISCUSSION

Findings of this study revealed that while compared with either self or teacher related characteristics, more university undergraduates attributed procrastination in academic tasks to task related characteristics. In other words, the characteristics of given task is a determinant factor in whether learners will procrastinate or not in its execution. This finding corroborates

Steel (2007) assertion that the aversive nature of task contribute to procrastination. Also, the finding partially supports the outcome of Schraw, Wadkins and Olafson's (2007) study. Though, Schraw, Wadkins and Olafson (2007) reported in their findings that among the three antecedents of procrastination, self-characteristics were considered as the most important factor disposing students to engage in the act of procrastination. It was reported that learners tend to procrastinate or delay the completion of task they did not enjoy. This outcome still bothers on task such that the more aversive the task, the less interest in completing such as task.

The vast majority (more than seventy-nine percent) of those attributed their procrastination behaviour to task characteristics indicated that they do procrastinate when the task is not considered as their priority at the time, and when the task was too difficult to handle alone. How interesting a task is, to complete, individual intellectual capability for a given task, and possession of good organizational skills play a significant role in determining of self-related characteristics when considering procrastination. This finding also lends credence to findings of Schraw, Wadkins and Olafson (2007) on how self-characteristics influence procrastination in academic tasks.

Among the students whose attribution was oriented towards teachers' characteristics, provision of details instruction by instructor, how easy or otherwise the instructor is, having understanding about the instructor's *modus operandi*, and flexibility of instructor are very important factors predisposing students procrastination behaviour. Indication is shown from the findings of this study that the university undergraduates sampled attributed the cause of their procrastination behaviour to external factor than internal. Making external attribution in procrastination has implication on individual's learners learning effort. For instance, students who regard external factors as principal cause of their failure see such cause as uncontrollable and will also believe that nothing could be done to change the situation (Ajayi & Owadara, 2014). This situation is described as learned helplessness by Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale, (1978). Making such uncontrollable attributions is believed to lead to the apathy and lack of motivation that characterizes the state of learned helplessness.

6. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that university undergraduates attribute their procrastinatory behaviors more to task, and self-characteristics. In other words, task characteristics is a form of external attribution whereas, attributing the antecedents of procrastination to self-related characteristics depicts internal form of attribution.

6.1 Recommendations

Since the university undergraduates have recognized task characteristics as potential predisposing factor in procrastination, it therefore, behooves the instructors to focus more on how they can make their teaching more interesting so as to facilitate understanding in their attempt to deal with procrastination among their students. The psychologists can also teach the students to be more proactive in their learning/study habits with adequate skills in self-regulated learning to tackle the incidence of academic procrastination.

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